

Michael Eure Show Transcript

Special Guest Leon Cox

Recorded 11/29/18

EURE: Hello this is Michael Eure, and I'd like to invite you to The Michael Eure Show featuring student hosts and very special guests talking about a variety of interesting topics. You can find us on the Eagle Stream YouTube Channel.

EURE: All right, welcome to the Michael Eure Show. And today we are really excited to have Leon Cox from the Sheraton Raleigh Hotel as well as the Wittenberg Foundation. We also have Talil Gourley, who is one of our student co-hosts for today. And then we have Alphonso Hedgepeth, who is also our student co-host. But he's gonna really help us with our online audience and ask those questions. And I will start with Alphonzo, just quickly tell us a little bit about yourself.

HEDGEPETH: I'm a student here at Wake Tech. I'm in the accounting program, and I'm looking to transfer to North Carolina Central next fall.

EURE: Talil?

GOURLEY: My name is Talil, I am a student here as well. And I'm looking to go into the business field, as far as sports, and journalism, and TV broadcasting, and stuff like that.

EURE: And Leon?

COX: Leon Cox, general manager of the Sheraton Downtown Raleigh. And as you mentioned before, I was one of the founding members of the Derek Lindbergh Foundation and do a lot of stuff for local colleges in the area.

EURE: All right, well tell the audience how did you get involved with the Lindbergh Foundation?

COX: Derek and I had a long-lasting relationship that kinda goes back to our time at NC State and we do a lot with the V Foundation. So Derek had started with me when we launched Jimmy V's Osteria Bar. He was instrumental in a lot of the memorabilia, the relationship with the V Foundation. So he helped us launch the restaurant and tie this in relationships with the V Foundation. And so it was just on a shopping trip one day. We were going to buy shirts and question came up, kinda what else did we wanna do. And when I looked at him and asked the question, he basically said he wanted to do something for education. And this was in April; we literally launched the foundation in June of that year. And one of our major fundraisers was a golf tournament, which was August of that year. So you're talking April of 15 we had this conversation. We go through the throes of actually launching a file 1C3. In June, we get all of that legitimate and in August we're at a golf tournament. And so that's kind

of really how it started, us just having a conversation. And anybody knows Derek, Derek's not gonna just have a conversation. He's gonna do something with the conversation that he has. It's just who he is. So he's always gonna do something, and from that conversation we put that into motion and we started a foundation.

EURE: Great. And so I'm really excited to have these students to help us today. So we gonna see what they can do, and we're gonna say, Talil, let's see if you have a question or two.

GOURLEY: To start off, just tell us a little bit about Leon Cox.

COX: Okay, the thing that I love most about me is small town guy. I grew up in eastern part of the state, little town called Winterville, North Carolina, probably 3,000 people. And the largest part of that is loving everything about that. I love my upbringing. I'm nine or ten, my dad, the late Johnny Cox, was a minister. My mom, who turned 95 last month, is that environment, the friendships that I established growing up. And that taught me a lot about loyalty towards individuals and people. I wouldn't give anything for my upbringing in the small knit community in which I was born and raised. So for me, that's me. I've learned to nurture those relationships into long lasting relationships. When we talk about people like Derek, and you have a relationship that's a long lasting relationship. I've got friend from NC State days, friends from high school, friends that I went first grade with. That's kind of the make up of who I am. I'm small town, I'm loyal and really enjoy nurturing and growing those relationships for long-term.

EURE: Okay, now generally speaking, what are the qualifications for becoming a Wittenberg scholar? And does Wake Tech receive scholarship funds from the foundation?

COX: Yes, first and foremost, because Derek was an athlete, he eliminated athletes, so it cannot be a college athlete. You have to be a junior or senior. And then there has to be the largest piece of risk, there has to be a funding need. Meaning that people find themselves in hardships. They can't graduate because they need money to graduate. And so the schools that we've worked with, as I stated before, Dr. Scott, Michael and I met at a chamber event. And this particular campus was important because of the mix of students you have. As you were alluding to earlier, a lot of your people are continuing ed or in that vein. And so it meant a lot to us to help because a lot of these people need the help. They're working, they're trying to finish school. They're parents, they're trying to finish school. So it was a good relationship. And so the second year of the foundation, we were able to identify students. And basically, a few of the universities do the board applications. And the students have to sit down and they have to write letters. They have to have people give them some backing. So we take all that into consideration. We look at GPAs, we hear their story. And then we select those students, but the need had to be there first. And then NC State provides us those students, and Wake Tech does a good job of providing those students to us. The other universities, we added Peace College this year. We added

Meredith last year. And Shaw University has been existing those. Shaw and NC State were the first two universities and then we added Saint Augustine's last year. So Some of the universities provide, and then the board gets all of the applications, and then will kind of choose.

EURE: And one thing for our students that are listening, he said you have to be a junior or a senior. But for the community college, you just need to get the last year, which is similar.

COX: Yes, yes, yes.

EURE: Now, there's a Wittenburger.

COX: When we opened a restaurant, there is technically our Director of Hospitality. That's his official title in the restaurant. So we wanted to do something for him, to honor him, since the restaurant was all around coaching. So we came up with a Wittenburger. We also got a 19 or a 25 pizza that's his too. He comes, he tastes, he looks at menus. So it kinda lost out our relationship and that's honestly our top selling menu item that we have the restaurant, Zoidberg, you know? So and he gets proceeds from that too, but you know. So all right, that's fun.

EURE: Online, I just wanna remind you, if you're online, you can ask questions. And Alphonzo, do we have any questions?

HEDGEPEETH: Yes, we do have a question.

EURE: Go ahead.

HEDGEPEETH: For some of our younger student's who is Derek Winberg?

COX: Derek Winberg was the captain of the 1983 NC State championship team. He also, which a lot of people don't know, is a Emmy award winner. Survived in advance which was a 30-for-30 ESPN series. He was the executive producer of that series. And so, that was one of the first 2-hour which he won an Emmy and it talked about the 1983 championship team and Coach Valvano. So he was a member of that team. So if you wanna kind of go back and she stayed only has two championships 1974 David Thompson, who David Thompson happens to be his cousin.

HEDGEPEETH: Wow.

COX: And Derrick's team in 1983, so that's who Derek Winberg is. And in this championship game he wants to call it a pass, so he took the last shot Lorenzo Charles dunked and helped us beat the Houston Cougars who were heavily favored in that game, so.

EURE: That was a good question. Do you have any more questions? Or do you have any questions Talil?

GOURLEY: How would students, individuals, or In organizations, become involved in volunteers, and/or donors.

COX: DWFoundation.org is the website. We had multiple fundraisers, multiple events during the year. Jacquelyn Winberg, who's Derek's wife is the executive director of the foundation. The golf tournament is one of our larger events. Since we moved it to June, we'll come up with specific dates, but you can always go on the website, ask, send questions, there are email addresses there. if you want to volunteer for some of the events. Our awards dinner is December the 4th, so next week. So anytime we have big events they'll be on that website and it gives you the opportunity to communicate by email if you want to volunteer. For sure events. So right there on our website.

EURE: I like that. Just totally different. Do you have any volunteer needs at this point? Or have you met them?

COX: I think they have been met, for this year. And, yeah, it's always a need for volunteers, just golf tournament where every golf player, which we normally have 24, so you've got 80 to 100 golfers. We stuck bags. [CROSSTALK] The first three years were Lonnie Poole. We moved over to McGregor Downs last year, and we've got one more year there this coming year.

EURE: Okay.

COX: So it's moved, we started at Lonnie Poole, then Coach V actually lived at McGregor Downs this year, so we moved to that this year.

EURE: I like that, you remind me of the ACC in the NCAA, shopping around, don't keep it in the same city. All right, and I want to remind that all our people, please feel free to ask your questions. I'm gonna skip over now to how did you get involved in hotel Madison.

COX: I literally ask my mom for a car my sophomore year in college and she looked at me like I was crazy. And so, I had to get a job and so, I started with the Marriott organization, setting up banquet rooms. And honestly, a year in, I knew this was what I was gonna be doing for a significant amount of time, I fell in love with it. I fell in love with the hospitality aspect and for people that won't understand that it won't get into the hospitality business first and foremost you got to love people. You ought to be around people and that's the aspect that I loved about it. I loved the customer service, it's different everyday, even back then it was different every day. But if you don't have a love for people in the hospitality community, it's not something that you wanna do.

EURE: Yeah, I like that. You know when you work with people there are always these people that say I love working with people until they have to work with too many people at a time.

COX: It's an internal and external thing. You got external customers and then I've got the internal people that I actually work with. But you still gotta love people either way.

EURE: Well, internal is customer service. So, Tallil, do you have another you feel like asking?

GOURLEY: What was the drawing force that helped you make the decision to come back to Raleigh from Charlotte and take on the general manager position at the Sheraton?

COX: That was, man that was a, it was a tough decision for me, because I love Charlotte. I really learned what I'm doing now and building relationships, community relationships. I learned that in Charlotte. But the biggest motivator was my wife of 22 years. And we had been travelling around for the last, about 16,17 years and I always promised her that we would, I would get her back home and get the Raleigh. And so, for the first time in my career wasn't about where I wanted to go, what I wanted to do, it was about getting her back home, which was a great decision As I mentioned before, my mom's in her 90s. Her mom was aging. So getting back here gave us the ability both to be close to family. And so she was kind of the driving force, but I'm fortunate to come back to Raleigh.

EURE: Yeah, so in corporate America and in education, a big word now is called innovation and disruption. So tell me, what kind of innovations do you wanna talk about that you brought to the Sheraton Downtown?

COX: I don't know if it's, well-

EURE: Well, I know you make a lot more money.

COX: The innovation piece that's touched the hotel industry is I think first and foremost social media. There's a lot more voices around your service. You gotta think like Tripadvisor, Booking.com. A lot of websites that people can go on and actually, even Twitter, give live and Facebook. You're live in a venue, that's an aspect that has to be managed because you're managing reputations. So that's an innovation that everybody in our industry is dealing with. And then, the second, I think this that's larger is there's a movement away from engagement. Meaning, now customers can book on their phone, check in on their phone. And in some hotels, which we're moving towards, the key to your hotel room is your phone. So now all the engagement that you had with the front desk, checking in and all of that kind of taken away because they don't need you. They check in on their phone, they check in and their phone becomes their hotel room key. So there's less opportunity for

engagement, which now you have to create engagement and communication and forms of communication. So we've got systems that allow us to text guests, that allow guests to communicate back to us real time. That's a piece of the hospitality world that's really changing and will continue to evolve is how do we continue to communicate to people that we don't necessarily see, because that engagement piece has been taken away by technology.

EURE: Okay, and another thing with engagement, you do a lot with the community, young people. I know you've hosted students from Cape Town, South Africa this summer. You've done stuff with Teen Fest, the Fatherhood Conference was held there before. What are your thoughts about back to the community, and especially leadership development with you? That's a lot of questions.

COX: When I first moved back here, as I stated, the first ten years of my career were Raleigh. My wife's born and raised in Raleigh. And so you can't be a business downtown without connecting back to the community, right? And so that was the first piece of it, big hotel downtown, we wanna connect to community. And then you attached in one of our core values with Sheraton as a brand is community. So we had the opportunity with creating the Jimmy V Osteria Bar to give back from a cancer standpoint, Derek's foundation. All the things that you mentioned give us the opportunity to be part of a community in which we work, live, love. I felt we couldn't run a business downtown without connecting to community. So it's not only a core value of the brand, it's a core value of kinda how I think. I've been very fortunate to have ownership that supports that. They don't mind us giving back and because it's reciprocal, you give, people give to you too. So it's enhanced our revenues. In the six years I've been there, our revenues have grown 7 million top line, so it's reciprocal. We give, but there's a whole lot of love being given back to us. Because people come and they are patrons of ours and they give back to us in that way. They bring us business so it's reciprocal.

EURE: Good to hear that. So there is not any good deed goes unpunished. Some are more that's good. So you have another question, Talial, that you feel like asking?

GOURLEY: Do you think there are good opportunities available for individuals into resident hospitality industry?

COX: Yes, a lot of opportunities, so, I think people look at the hotel industry, and they either come into it in probably one of two ways. One, they're going out town, they're traveling and they need a place to stay. And/or they're coming to a restaurant or something to eat. Those are the things that people see from the surface. But behind all of that are careers that are very, very rewarding careers. We talk about rooms, somebody has to manage the inventory, somebody has to clean the inventory, somebody has to manage laundry facilities. So there's management aspects around that. The checking in process, somebody has to manage that space from valet, to bell, to front desk. So there's management opportunities there. We do sales and marketing. A lot of people don't see that as part of what we do. But my sales and

marketing department, there's ten people strong, most them of which are managers. There's accounting. Everybody got to count the beans and make sure that things appropriated. So you've got accounting, management and CPAs, and all of that and that infrastructure. And then you've got culinary. A lot of people don't realize, if you love to cook, there's a lot of money being made around the people cooking. When I was in Providence, I had an opportunity to work with Emeril Lagasse. Emeril's foundation, he is a Johnson & Wales guy. So he's right there and Johnson & Wales is right there in Providence, Rhode Island. And then you're talking to a guy that's a multimillionaire, all around just lovely and cool. So those are the things that behind the scenes people don't see but it's a lot of management opportunities. And like I said, I knew that year one and I saw it. And how is the textile guy in the late 80s, textiles were because of the labor, everything was moving out of the country. So I was fortunate enough to find something that I loved and fell in love with it, and they gave me my first management opportunity.

EURE: And we talked about that social media piece, that's embedded in your marketing department.

COX: Yes, it is from a most brands now have that embedded within the scope of their marketing. But because I also have a restaurant arm, we have to embed in that piece, too, whether it's communicating specials, or events, or things of that nature. Yeah, it's embedded in both of them.

EURE: And you talk about Colbert a little bit, since we have it. I know that you met with Shep Hadley and had the tour of the Southern Wake campus facilities. But we're gonna make sure you come back and visit the Northern Wake.

COX: Definitely.

EURE: Have you worked with us in any kind of way? Or is it just you know each other?

COX: No, we look for culinary talent out of here. As a matter of fact, I've got three of your former students in my space currently. And there's always a need, especially one of the things that people don't understand, Raleigh Downtown has over 100 restaurants. And that was one of the things that lowered, or that started the revolution of downtown. So from that standpoint, there's always gonna be a need for culinary talent. When you've got that many restaurants and that many people being successful, or trying to be successful at operating restaurants, you're always gonna need culinary talent. And it's fast paced, it's fast moving, so you want some-

EURE: Question? Yeah, go ahead.

HEDGEPEETH: Compared to the other cities that you've been in, how would you rate or compare the Raleigh restaurant scene?

COX: Raleigh restaurant ... We wanna come downtown, there's a reason to come downtown. And now that I'm in the hospitality field and part of the Convention and Visitors Bureau, they market that as a reason to come downtown. So the city center was torn down. The convention center was built. Now, because you have that venue, you have hotels, you have food venues, people want to visit Raleigh. Probably not as large as, like I said, the Charlotte market, but getting there. The markets that I live in, the markets driven by the amount of hotel rooms in the market downtown. Charlotte probably in that, creeping to that 4 to 5,000 rooms available in downtown. They're working on the convention center expansion. We're getting there. We're in that 1,200 or room range downtown in our market. But there are probably three projects that will be coming out of the ground in 19, that will enhance that. So getting there, I don't think we'll ever be an Atlanta or a Charlotte. But we will be larger and we'll continue, we're starting to see that growth. But it all started around kinda around culinary

EURE: All right and this has been a great, great show and I know that this is an abrupt ending, but it's the end. Our time has run out, and I thank the audience for participating, and it will be online on YouTube. And if you wanna talk with Leon, you wanna get them, you just call the Sheraton Downtown and you'll kind of speak with them?

COX: Yeah, definitely, just call in. We're local, our 834-9900 number, ask for me, and yeah, be more than happy to answer the questions, answer any question.

EURE: And we're gonna follow up with Kalile and some other students and we're gonna get that thing done with our outreach cuz he's a basketball coach. Bring those young people up here, do some leadership things. So thanks again, and everybody, have a great day, we'll be back in January.